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Exploration Of The USA Culture By Mexican Language Students Through Reading Chicano Literature

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Abstract

Language students are expected to be conscious of the fact that the target language is an expression of the culture of those societies where it is used in everyday communication. Using literary texts is an important means of fostering and developing the learners' intercultural awareness. Chicano literature (written by those authors of Mexican origin who permanently live in the USA) can be of special help in this process. Chicano writers' experiences in their daily encounters with the North American culture can make it easier for language learners in Mexico to explore and understand this foreign culture, and to overcome their own prejudices and stereotypes towards it. Thus, a study was conducted among Mexican university language students to examine the possibility of increasing the learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) through reading literary texts. The survey participants responded to a questionnaire related to the concept of culture and their knowledge of the target culture. They also read and discussed a short story written by a Chicano writer paying special attention to different cultural topics covered in them. On the whole, the study has shown that the learners' sociocultural characteristics and experiences have an enormous impact on their perceptions of the North American culture. The results can help to optimize the process of choosing and elaborating didactic materials in English as well as class planning and methodology that would develop the learners' intercultural competence.

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1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is widely considered to be a complex process in the sense that its progression and outcome depend on a number of crucial factors: cognitive, affective, social, biological, and personal (cf. Brown,

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2007). In fact, studying an additional language requires gaining different competences of both linguistic and non-linguistic type that help learners to hold a good command of the target language. In this regard, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (2011) distinguishes general competences and communicative language competences. The former encompass the language user's declarative knowledge, skills, existential competence, and ability to learn. The latter include linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences.

Thus, a successful communication in a foreign language requires not only using properly its grammar rules and vocabulary, but also taking into account sociocultural aspects of the target language society. During communicative interactions of this kind, language learners get an opportunity to explore the culture of the "other" from their own cultural perspective. In order to benefit from such encounters, they need to reinforce their intercultural competence. It is necessary to stress that intercultural competence, together with linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competences, form intercultural communicative competence (ICC) that allows language learners to link a foreign culture with their own one through their ability to use the target language appropriately (Byram 2001).

2. Use of literature in language learning

For many language learners, an ideal path of increasing their understanding of the target language reality is reading literary texts in this language because this kind of material provides a direct access to other cultures. There exists a close relationship among literature, language, and culture. Actually, literature is a product of a particular culture; therefore, while reading it, people enhance their knowledge about the history, customs, and lifestyle of the members of a given culture. They also adopt an intercultural perspective in order to reflect properly on the human behaviour described in literary works. As literature portrays different societies in their historical moments, and expresses thoughts and philosophy of certain epochs, readers establish relations among different historical, social, and artistic events as well as identify moral and ethical issues that transcend diverse cultures and are often regarded as universal values and beliefs.

A peculiar characteristic of literary works is that they describe civilizations or communities from the viewpoint of their authors who try to influence directly or indirectly on their readers' vision of the world. Finally, each literary text is open to multiple interpretations; in other words, it is polysemic by its nature. It means that it is a product of a particular epoch, but at the same time it possesses some kind of intemporality because it often touches on universal themes and values such as love, death, anxiety, etc.

3. Reading Chicano literature by Mexican English-language learners

3.1. Objectives of the study

The previously mentioned ideas served as a base for designing and conducting a study among the students enrolled in English-reading comprehension courses in the Metropolitan Autonomous University, Mexico City, in 2014. The main purpose of this research was to examine the possibility of increasing the learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) through reading literary texts.

3.2. Research methods and procedures

The research consisted of two phases: theoretical (literature review and elaboration of methodology) and empirical (data collection, home tasks and classroom activities). The empirical part began with a survey among 92 students who responded to a questionnaire with close- and open-ended questions. The aim of this procedure was to determine the learners' attitudes towards English-speaking cultures, as well as the students' interest in exploring these societies through reading their literature.

The analysis of the obtained results has shown that the survey participants had general knowledge about the Anglophone world, but not too much about its cultural content. At the beginning of the survey, they were asked to give the names of four English-speaking countries, and the majority of them (83%) put the USA in the first place. Other countries mentioned in a descending order were England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Jamaica. The

culture of most attention was that of Great Britain. As a whole, the students wanted to know better the history, customs, music, movies, different geographical areas, sociopolitical systems, etc. of all these nations because they connected them with progress and trendiness by referring to them as “world power”, “McDonalds”, “casinos”, “clothes”, “music”, “food”, “big cities”, “technology”, “development”, “universal language”, “good education”, “sports”, etc.

After the survey, the learners were introduced to the notion of Chicano literature because of its close relation with the Mexican culture, and also the important place it occupies in the American literary canon. It should be noted that the term ‘Chicano’ refers to Mexican Americans who permanently reside in the USA. Their literary works can be traced back to the sixteenth century, but it was in the 1960s when their poems, short stories, dramas, and essays novels became popular among North American readers and critics. Chicano literature turns around the problems that affect the life of Chicanos as well as the ambiguity of the identity of this minority ethnic group. Hence, Chicano authors try to reinterpret their history and revive Hispanic traditions. They touch on such issues as the encounter of different cultures, hard living conditions, labour exploitation, family disintegration, educational discrimination, a lack of access to social sanity, prejudices, women’s rights, internal and external racism, among others. Thus, this literature represents those marginalized voices of the large Mexican American community constituted by 33.7 million people (Barrera and Lopez, 2013) who want to be heard through a protest against their uneasy sociopolitical situation in the USA.

As the above-mentioned problems are of universal significance, they are worth to be discussed in any language class aimed at developing the learners’ intercultural competence. As for the university students who participated in the study, they were encouraged to explore Chicano literature by reading the literary works of Jose Antonio Burciaga (1940-1996), the author of numerous essays, short stories, novels, and poems. In his literary works, this writer explored the flaws of the North American social and political system, especially those ones related to racism and discrimination. The writer used humour, irony, and satire to convey messages about inequities and cultural difficulties faced by Chicanos in the society they live in.

In this regard, Burciaga’s short story “The first Thanksgiving” is a good illustration of how the author tries to make his reader be aware of different social problems. Moreover, it was chosen for class reading activities not only due to its literary value, but also because of a large amount of cultural and historical information on the American society it contains. In this text, the author describes his childhood memories about the celebrating of two holidays - the Thanksgiving Day and Christmas. He starts his narration with some accounts of the origin of the Thanksgiving Day that refer to the hospitality local Indigenous people had expressed towards European newcomers on their arrival to the American continent.

But after the description of such harmonious relationships between the two cultures, the Burciaga gives one more version that relates a massacre of an Indigenous tribe committed by white people who later started to commemorate annually that defeat every. The writer (2008:79) remarks that he prefers his “fond memories”, and wishes he “had never learned that last version.” Though, “maybe it is better we do know. The pain such painful history leaves on a day like Thanksgiving is especially acrid. But for that too we can say, Gracias.”

After that, the author makes a parallel between the origin of the Thanksgiving Day and the events described in the first Euro-American play presented in the United States. The latter tells us about how Juan de Oñate’s expedition set out from Mexico City to the north in 1598, and how the group, tortured by thirst and exhaustion, could finally rest and recuperate on the banks of the Rio Grande. In the same year, after the possession of those lands, that territory was proclaimed the Kingdom of New Mexico. So, the students who read this short story not only got information on the history of the American nation, but also internalized it through the description of the events related to their own culture.

Burciaga also recalls that Thanksgiving Day when he was 9 years old, and how he returned home from school expecting to eat a turkey and a pumpkin pie as his Anglo-Saxon classmates did on that day, but, instead, his mother served her children five bowls of freshly made beans saying in Spanish: “Give thanks to God for having something to eat.”

Furthermore, the author shares with us his experience about the use of Spanish in the American society in the 1940s. He describes one Christmas epoch when he had to sing carols at school and in other public places in English, German, even Latin, but never could do that in Spanish because using this language openly was prohibited. So, it

was at home where he could hear these songs in Spanish because his mother sang them to him and his brothers in this language, thereby encouraging them not to forget their roots.

For many years Burciaga together with his parents and brothers lived in a basement of a synagogue where his father was part of a cleaning staff. At school, Burciaga, as a boy, learned mainly about various Anglo-Saxon cultural traditions, and at home, living next to Jews, he could discover for himself some traditions of this ethnic community. His childhood experience taught him to get along with people of different cultural backgrounds with tolerance and respect throughout all his life.

Before a group discussion of this short story, the students read it at home paying attention to both plot development and literary devices that the author used to convey deeper and richer meaning to his writing. In a classroom, the learners analyzed local and universal cultural topics touched in this literary text. It is expected that this kind of activity would help the students to advance in the growth of their intercultural awareness. In fact, the evolution of this competence is multilevel in the sense that it passes through the following stages (Meyer, 1991) to reach the maximum point of its development:

- *Monocultural* level where a person mentally relies on the norms and rules of his own culture while trying to solve the problems he faces during an intercultural encounter. That is to say, a foreign culture is interpreted from the perspective of the own one. In this case, prejudices and stereotypes can take dominance.
- *Intercultural* level where the learner mentally positions himself between two cultures: his own culture and a foreign one. The knowledge about the culture of the 'other' allows him to make comparisons between both cultures, as well as to use various means to explain possible cultural differences.
- *Transcultural* level where the student places himself over the two cultures at a certain distance, thereby letting himself be a mediate between both cultures. In this process, the learner uses international principles of cooperation and communication. Thus, during his contacts with a different culture, the foreign language user (re)defines and (re)builds his individual and social identities adopting an agreement with and acceptance of the 'other'.

The classroom activities made the students realise that in their encounters with the 'otherness' it was not sufficient to express their empathy towards a foreign culture or to contrast/compare it with their own one. Instead, their interactions with that culture should comprise an intricate process of mediations and negotiations where they would be situated in a space between different identities and cultures (Kramsch, 1993); (Bhabha, 1994); (Alred, Byram, and Fleming, 2002). In this regard, (Kramsch, 1993) argues that when the language learner accumulates certain experience about the 'other', he starts feeling the necessity to mediate between his own culture and the foreign one, to negotiate symbolic meanings of both cultures by placing himself on a common territory, a so-called 'third space', that is "a third culture with its own legitimacy".

In general, the students found it interesting and motivational to read Chicano literature in terms of improving their linguistic and non-linguistic skills, as well as enriching their personality. During the classroom discussion, they all agreed with the idea that Chicano writers allowed them to understand better the multicultural character of the American society. Here come some opinions in that regard:

- The truth is that I didn't know some things, and I noticed it because of the festivities and their origins. Customs of different countries vary from place to place, but everywhere Christmas celebrations pursue the same objective.
- This short story focuses on the culture of Chicanos and on how they try to make their own customs part of the already established customs of the country of their residence. It also teaches that despite the differences among religions or cultures that exist in the USA, there is a union among them on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. I also like that part of the story that tells us that Spanish is very nice, that it is the language with which one can speak to God, and that carols are heard lovelier in it. It is a great story.
- I found out new things about some festivities in other cultures. Also, I realised that one should tolerate others' thoughts or beliefs.

4. Conclusion

The results of the study have confirmed the idea that the type of information the students get on a foreign language and its native speakers influences directly or indirectly on their way of using of diverse linguistic and non-

linguistic means in an attempt to solve all kinds of problems they can confront during learning and practising the target language.

It is expected that the results of the study can help to optimize the process of choosing and elaborating didactic materials in English as well as class planning and methodology that would develop the learners' intercultural competence.

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